God is a Fallen Deity
Luke 24: 13-21; 28-35
August 30, 1970

In many ancient cultures the worst thing that could happen, the ultimate disaster, was the toppling of an idol . Ancient men believed that when an IDOL FELL, the god symbolized by that idol died. Society was held together by a common religion - it was the adhesive force. Invaders and marauders usually headed straight for the temples - or the sacred places to desecrate - to topple the idols, for that act demonstrated their victims' helplessnss. The toppling of an idol - the falling of a god was an ominous sign that life suddenly did not mean much, and that the future was not going to be worth living in.

8 That's ancient history, but it is also contemporary history. Today, the idols are toppling, the old gods are dying, and for many a whole way of life is dying with them.

And yet, we know that an important part of maturing is the realization that one's idols have feet of clay. It is possible to keep an idol on a pedastool only by retaining a juvenile image and by engaging in some kind of self deception. That , in turn, results in a failure really to understand the significance of the particular idol. Fake George Washington or Abraham Lincoln, for instance; popular folk - heroes; the closest thing we have to cultural idols. It is possible to think of Washington only in terms of cutting down the cherry three, throwing a dollar over the Potomac and praying in the snow at Valley Forge. That's the "larger than life, idol - ilmage." And many people get upset when it's suggested that Washington really had feet of clay - because an ordinary mortal doesn't make a very good idol. A recent biography, by the way, reveals that Washington's major sacrifice in the cold and hunger at Valley Forge - was to substitute rum and WATER FOR THE USUAL brandy in the General's tent, and that he was a very

adroit book-keeper regarding the accounts at Mount Vernon and his government vouchers.

Now that kind of information topples the idol. But it does something else as well. It frees us to see and understand the man. It sheds real light on the times, the events, the revolution. And it makes possible a mature knowledge of our heritage and history.

We live in a day when a lot of idols are toppling. Time magazine suggested some time ago that there could be no more MacArthurs of Eisenhowers; that the media - the sheer speed and depth of news transmission rules out the emergence of an honest - to - goodness cultural idol. Look at - Teddy Kennedy - and lately Martin Luther King. The list is long Jackie, Joe Louis, Joe Namath, F.D.R.

But I feel strongly that the results are more good than bad. Where idols are toppled, people emerge - and we are able to be rational about their meaning and the real significance of the events they caused to happen.

In a day when all idols are subject to the blunt process of demythologizing, popular religion finds itself in deep trouble. The truth is that much religiosity is no more than juvenile idol worship - that connot stand the harsh glare of truth and rationale inquiry. And yet, here too, I feel that there is more good than bad - that the cynical, brutally honest approach of the 1970's is a creative possibility for the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which - by the - is not interested at all in idols.

All that by way of preface to a very significant portion of scripture read this morning.

Two men, on the dusty, dirty road from Jerusalem to Emmaus - had recently experienced the toppling of an idol and the death of hope. It was the first day of the week after Jesus had been executed. In him they thought

they had discovered meaning for their lives, somdthing to live and die for, something real. They had considered the possibility that he might be divine - the true Son of God. But now he was dead and there was nothing lift. They probably still hoped for some sign, some miracle that would dramatically reverse the tide of events and restore the idol to its pedastool. Perhaps the heavens would open and God's son Jesus would descend accompanied by a legion of angels.

But, of course, nothing like that happened. Instead, they met a man, who joined them on their journey down that dusty road. At the end of the day they invited him to join them for dinner. And then, as Luke records it in one of the most simple and yet significant statements in all of literature: "When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened and they recognized him . . ."

That's a rather modest way of putting it. What it means is this: experiences of grace have their context not in the dramatic ceremony so much as the common round. The reality of Jesus Christ, the truth of the resurrection the very existence of God - all called into question by the toppling of an idol - were experienced by these men on the dusty road to Emmaus and the modest act of breaking bread together.

The church has always known the significance of that transaction; that is, that Jesus Christ is known and experienced in the common act of breaking bread together . In the sacrament of Holy Communion we affirm this truth by reenacting the table scene that evening. But, unfortunately, we often fail to see that communion testifies to a reality beyond itself. It is a ceremony = and it means that the reality of God may be experienced at every table, and in every encounter, simple, common - not just the stately

ritual of worship. I wish we could remember thht.

The skepticisim toward things religious of the 20th century, is forcing us to, whether we want to or not. The world has always asked the c church the fundamental question; is there a God?", but today there is an added hitch. God, the idol; Jesus - the idol of childhood Sunday School lessons - have been toppled. "Is there a God" has been replaced by the far more important question, "whereiis He? Does it really matter whether or not th exists?"

How do you answer that one? How do you cope with a new kind of skeptics that looks at the traditional offerings of popular religion and asks "So what?"

The old idols have been toppled. We can't rely on mature to bale us out any longer. Once upon a time men bought the idea that the unanswered mysteries of the natural order were evidence enough for any man. Men saw fire leap from the sky and destroy a tree and said: "See - that is God". But don't try that today, because lightning isn't really very much of a mystery; and while walking on the moon may inspire some of us at the magnificence of the Creator's work, to the skeptic it simply means that given the time, money and will,man is quite capable of banishing the word mystery from the vocabulary.

Billy Graham may answer the [illegible] "death of God school" with a smug "I know he's alive because I talked with him this morning", but don't try that with any reasonably articulate man who knows that the human psyche is capable of believing almost anything. After all we live in a century when millions of men believed Adolf Hitler, and Karl Marx; and spend millions of dollars a year to be told how to conduct their affairs on the basis of inane Babylonian Astrology. The personal approach won't work either.

You can't even use theology. It was once enough to say that God was in Christ because the Bible says he was. And all that means to the skeptic is that your toppled God is held shakily upright by your superstitious belief

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in an outdated, discredited book.

Strong medicine? You bet it is, but that's the kind of world we're living in. I do not mean that nature, personal experience and theology are irrelevant. The eyes of faith see the hand of God in nature. The heart of faith knows the presence of God; the mind of faith understands that the love of God was incarnate in the man Jesus.

But the growing impotance of the Christian religion is that it is answering questions nobody is asking any more, looking for God in the wrong places and painting the world the wrong images.

The only really valid question is "where is he now:what id he doing that matters to me". And if we can't deal with that one, we have no business suggesting that our religion warrants anyone's attention.

But rather than becoming defensive about the position the 20th century puts us in, I think that we have the best opportunity of all to be honest about our faith. And I think the New Testament lesson this morning is a good place to begin. The reaslity of God was there established on a dusty road. The reality of the Risen Christ was then experienced not in any dramatic revelation; not in the emotional hystrionics of mass evangelisum; certainly not in a peculation, philosophic discussion - but in in the ordinary, everyday act of breaking bread.

The best articulation of our faith that I know is the single sentence that begins "God so loved the world, that he gave his only son. . ." About that sentence, Wm. Stringfellow has written: "It is this world, the world we know, the world just as it is into which God comes, for which God cares, in which God is with us . . . " That means that if we are looking for God we ought to be looking at the world - for that is where he is.

Now, we have a lot of trouble with that - because part of the worn - out idol theology upon which we were weaned suggests that God really doesn't love the world - just parts of it; and that he really isn't a force active in the world - or at least his activity is pretty much confined to those events, movements and cause we happen to prefer.

Well, the really good news of the Gospel is that God, in fact, inhabits the world, and that there is no place, no event, no movement apart from his presence. The good news is that there is redemption possibility in every s situation out there. Even - and this is most incredible of all - even in death. In the Apostles Creed we affirm, as an item of belief, that Jesus Christ discended into hell. I take that to mean that there is nowhere in life I can go- including my own death - where God has not preceeded me; or where he is not present. That's the best news of all.

Our God, you see, really is a fallen deity. A God who has condescended to be among us. Unlike the ancients whose entire life fell apart when an i idol toppled, our lives have meaning because our God does not reigh from somewhere out there, but frrom the world he loves.

If your experience of God is not very real - and I expect this is true occassionally for all of us - perhaps you've been looking in the wrong places. Try a dusty road - or the city streets: try bread broken - or a common meal: try the ebb and flow of current history - or that small bit of history which constitutes your life. The good news of the Gospel is that that is where he is; and that is where we shall find him - or better said - be found by him. Amen

We often look for you , our Father, in desparation, out of lonliness - or fear - or perhaps habit. And we confess that we wait for the dramatic moment of clear, bright light that never comes. Grant us, O God, the sen- sitivity to experience your presence in the world you love, and in the every- day affairs of our own lives. Though Jesus Christ Our Lord. Amen